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How the Biden Administration Can Tackle America's Voter Turnout Problem

Creating a National Task Force on Civic Engagement and Voter Participation

By Hauwa Ahmed   March 16, 2021

American democracy is stronger when all eligible voters participate in elections. Low voter turnout can lead to poor policy outcomes and leaders who may be unresponsive to the needs of the majority. Despite the country's historically poor voting track record—and amid a pandemic and an economic crisis—nearly 160 million Americans made their voices heard at the ballot box in November 2020.[1] While the coronavirus crisis tested the U.S. electoral systems in profound ways, a higher percentage of Americans voted in last year's election than in any other in 120 years.[2] According to one analysis, turnout increased in every state[3] and in 98 percent of the nation's counties.[4] This significant increase is likely, in part, due to the fact that many jurisdictions adopted measures that made voting safer and more convenient.[5] Meanwhile, grassroots organizers' heroic efforts to encourage voting amid the pandemic, coupled with the especially contentious nature of this past year's presidential election, likely also contributed to high turnout rates in November.

But despite these gains, the United States still has a substantial voter turnout problem. Approximately 79.4 million Americans who were eligible to vote last year did not cast ballots.[6] And in 2018, about 120 million voting-eligible Americans did not participate in the midterm election,[7] while about 100 million voting-eligible people did not vote in 2016.[8] In fact, when compared with other democracies, the United States has one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the Western world.

Many factors contribute to low voter turnout in the United States. Voter suppression, for example, remains a significant problem nationwide, preventing countless Americans—particularly Black Americans and other Americans of color[9]—from making their voices heard each cycle.[10] Other factors affecting turnout include confusion over complicated voter registration and voting rules and disillusionment over the political process.

Although the executive branch does not have a direct hand in overseeing voting processes, the Biden-Harris administration can be influential in tackling America's voter turnout problem. Through its recently signed executive order on promoting access to voting, the administration has already demonstrated its commitment to protecting American's right to the ballot box.[11] But it can do more. The administration should convene a new National Task Force on Civic Engagement and Voter Participation, championing and building off the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act—two transformative pieces of legislation that include pro-voter reforms.

The task force's findings would provide voting advocates and state and local leaders with valuable insights and tools to champion additional policies that would improve voter participation.

A new task force to investigate and address low voter turnout

While states and localities are largely responsible for administering elections, the federal government has a role to play. Congress passes laws on how federal elections must be carried out, while the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, the U.S. Department of Justice, and numerous other federal agencies provide state and local jurisdictions with guidance and support to ensure that elections are conducted effectively and securely.

The Biden-Harris administration has an opportunity to include the White House in these efforts by establishing a National Task Force on Civic Engagement and Voter Participation. Situated within the White House Office of Public Engagement, the task force would study why millions of Americans who are eligible to vote fail to do so each election cycle, exploring root causes of low voter participation in the United States. It would then offer solutions for elected officials, grassroots organizers, faith leaders, and educational institutions to help boost turnout and increase participation across communities and political ideologies.

The task force could be split into two working groups:

1. The first group would produce largely analytical work investigating and assessing various factors contributing to low voter turnout in the United States, including voter suppression and intimidation, disillusionment in the political process, disinformation and confusion over voter registration and rules or deadlines, and various economic and societal factors.

2. The second working group would focus on fostering civic activism and engagement among young people since research suggests that voting may be habit-forming.[12]

After each working group has completed its individual assessments, the task force as a whole should author a detailed report that reflects both working groups' findings and recommendations. The task force should send this report—as well as policy recommendations to help drive civic engagement and voter participation in future elections—to Congress and state and local leaders. The report would include funding estimates for implementing pro-voter policies, and recommendations should be consistent with the legislative goals of the For the People Act[13] and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.[14]

Investigating the root causes of low voter turnout and identifying solutions

People's reasons for not participating in elections vary widely depending on individual and community circumstances. The first working group would study these reasons and explore the barriers and factors causing low voter turnout. For example, voter disillusionment tends to correlate with low participation rates. A Knight Foundation study found that 38 percent of nonvoters stated that they were not confident that election results reflected the will of voters and thus had doubts about the impact of their votes.[15] According to the report, nonvoters "cite poor-quality and corrupt elected officials, political fundraising, special interest dominance of policy making and, to some, a biased and misleading media-political complex, as reasons why the act of voting does not drive meaningful change."[16] Voters' doubts about engaging in the electoral process are further exacerbated by divisive rhetoric from political leaders, which casts doubt on the integrity of the voting process,[17] as well as by the proliferation of misinformation on social media[18] and the contentious nature of recent political campaigns.[19] In 2016, the proportion of nonvoters who felt disillusioned with the electoral process did not vary by income status, meaning people from all economic backgrounds—low income, middle class, and wealthy alike—experienced disillusionment with the political process.[20]

Voter suppression is another widespread barrier to participation nationwide. For example, in Georgia last year, some voters waited in line for 11 hours to cast their ballots; and voters belonging to historically underrepresented groups were disproportionately affected.[21] In fact, among Georgia voters waiting in line after 7 p.m. on Election Day, the average wait time at polling places was about 51 minutes in jurisdictions that were at least 90 percent nonwhite,[22] compared with only six minutes in jurisdictions that were at least 90 percent white.[23] These increased wait times in predominantly Black communities can be attributed to the fact that polling places in Georgia have been cut statewide since the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*.[24] Additionally, polling places were either eliminated or consolidated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic,[25] and since the 2020 general election, Republican lawmakers across the country have introduced legislation that would make voting less accessible.[26] According to a report

by Generation Progress, since 2010, at least 25 states have enacted laws that make voting less accessible,[27] with measures ranging from restrictive voter ID laws to mandatory voter registration purges.[28]

Confusion over voting requirements and processes also lowers turnout rates,[29] and voters may experience additional logistical challenges such as lack of transportation to polling places. In 2016, lower-income Americans were more likely to cite barriers such as illness, disability, or a lack of access to adequate transportation as reasons they did not vote.[30] Meanwhile, young voters[31]—particularly young voters of color and those with lower educational attainment—face these obstacles at disproportionately high rates.[32]

Numerous socioeconomic factors prevent people from voting as well. Low-income Americans may not be able to obtain flexible paid time off work or affordable caregiving services while visiting polling places—and may face additional challenges locating government offices where they can obtain voter registration and voting materials. People with disabilities are disproportionately affected by socioeconomic barriers in the voting process. While there have recently been increases in turnout rates for people living with disabilities, years of inadequate outreach by political campaigns and challenges navigating inaccessible polling places have kept turnout within the disability community historically low.[33]

The first working group's role

As part of its fact-finding process, the National Task Force on Civic Engagement and Voter Participation's first working group would engage directly with voters and nonvoters, who can share personal experiences, and should include representatives from the following groups:

• Local, state, and federal policymakers

• Community organizers and religious leaders

• Social scientists and economists

• Social media and digital strategists

• Voting rights and disability advocates

Upon completion of its work, the group should produce a messaging memo for distribution to nonprofit organizations, elected officials, campaigns, and grassroots organizations, among others. This memo should include top-lines on major factors that contribute to low participation rates, as well as a summary of emerging trends contributing to low voter turnout. For example, if the task force finds that long-term logistical barriers to the ballot box have consequences for disillusion-

ment, the memo should outline this. The first working group should also highlight factors that disproportionately affect historically underrepresented groups and emerging trends contributing to low turnout.

In addition to the memo, the working group should create a toolkit designed to help interested parties improve voter participation, particularly among voting-eligible people who did not vote in past elections. Nonprofit and grassroot organizations, politicians, and education institutions can use the toolkit to build get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns and establish initiatives to help Americans who were previously disengaged overcome disillusionment and other obstacles that prevented them from voting in past cycles. The toolkit could include step-by-step instructions for how stakeholders can most effectively engage with disillusioned nonvoters through community events, listening tours, door-to-door canvassing initiatives, and social media campaigns.

The toolkit could also provide a list of best practices for engaging with nonvoters through social media and advertising campaigns so as to encourage them to participate. Interactive explainer videos, Twitter chats or "tweetstorms," and gifs are all useful tools for helping raise public awareness around factors that lead to voter disillusionment and low voter turnout, as well as for highlighting strong policy solutions that can build on the transformative solutions outlined in the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act. Such voter-centered social media campaigns can provide Americans with accurate information about upcoming elections, Election Day transportation options, and registration or absentee voting deadlines, helping to ensure that voting-eligible people are not blocked from voting due to logistical challenges.

Fostering civic engagement and voting among young people

The National Task Force on Civic Engagement and Voter Participation's second working group would identify tools and tactics for promoting civic engagement and voter participation among young people. Increasing this group's civic engagement is critical for ensuring that American democracy remains strong and vibrant.[34] Research also suggests that voting is habitual, so getting people engaged in elections at a young age would help to bolster participation rates for decades to come.[35] Studies show that engagement in civic activities—such as community service and volunteer activities—can help foster future political participation among young people.[36] Due to the exposure gained through these experiences, young people who are civically engaged often become better informed about pressing policy issues[37] and are more likely to engage in democratic processes, compared with those who are not involved in civic activities.[38] As an added bonus, youth civic engagement is also correlated with better social and emotional development outcomes as well as higher educational achievement.[39]

In recent years, youth civic engagement has increased significantly.[40] By harnessing the power of peaceful demonstrations and sit-ins and by volunteering to serve as poll workers, young people have already emerged as a highly influential force in American democracy. In 2018, students across the country staged walkouts to protest gun violence in the wake of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida.[41] A year later, young people were at the forefront of organizing climate strikes.[42] And once again, in the summer of 2020, young people played a crucial role in organizing the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted around the nation following George Floyd's murder at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department.[43]

The second working group's role

It is unsurprising that increased activism in response to social issues and outrage over systemic racism and inequality has translated to historic youth turnout during recent years.[44] To sustain these recent trends in youth civic participation and voting, the White House should work with a broad range of stakeholders to identify strategies for building on this momentum. The task force's second working group should therefore include and be co-chaired by representatives from the following groups:

• Community activists and voting advocates

• Teachers and education policy experts

• Youth community leaders and young disability rights advocates

• Young people who are voters and nonvoters

Through a series of six convenings over a nine-month period, the working group should engage with both young voters and nonvoters. Over the course of these convenings, the working group would discuss organizing strategies that have bolstered youth civic engagement in recent years as well as potential challenges that young people face when trying to participate in elections. The working group should also outline policies, at both the state and local level, to increase youth civic engagement. For example, youth preregistration and better-quality civic education in schools could be key first steps to increasing youth civic engagement.[45]

The second working group's findings should be shared in the form of a messaging memo that includes top-lines on current trends in youth civic engagement as well as the various structural barriers that block youths from voting even when they are interested doing so. The task force should share the messaging memo with nonprofit organizations, grassroots organizations, and think tanks, which can then incorporate these findings in their outreach to youth groups on key policy issues such as democracy reform and climate change. Additionally, these findings could be used by youth advocacy groups as they work to expand civic engagement in their respective communities.

Conclusion

With its emphasis on building coalitions across party lines and bringing Americans together, the Biden administration has a unique opportunity to tackle America's voter turnout problem and lead on solutions that increase civic participation in the country's political process, especially among communities of color and young people. In particular, the creation of a National Task Force on Civic Engagement and Voter Participation could bring together advocates, experts, voters, and nonvoters to investigate and offer solutions for barriers and disillusionment that prevent eligible Americans from voting, demonstrating the administration's commitment to building a democracy that is just, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all Americans.

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